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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, women's literature had not yet arrived in the high school classroom, nor in graduate studies. Only some 20 years later was attention turned to women's literature through the publication of the "Norton Anthology of Literature by Women." Contemporary works by women writers that speak powerfully to the issue of women's voicelessness are Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, "The Color Purple" and Jane Campion's acclaimed film, "The Piano." Both works begin with an imposition of silence and end with each protagonist finding her voice. There is an ethical dimension involved in choosing texts which does not have to do with censorship and control but rather with the liberation of thought. Texts such as these not only encourage the move from silence towards language, especially for those marginalized students who might need encouragement the most, but also offer alternate values and moralities from those of a dominant culture which may suppress certain segments of society. Teaching such texts, in all their complexity, far from diminishing the literary canon, illustrates how the acquisition of voice and language is so central to speaking autonomously, thinking independently, and becoming capable of genuinely moral action which can only issue from an authentic individual. (Contains 21 notes and 6 references.) (CR)

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Language as Moral Action

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Reflections on the 25th Year of Teaching

When I first began teaching in the seventies, some twenty-five years ago, I went straight from graduate school to a position in which I was **the** English teacher, **the** English Department Chair and **the** English Department in a small, inner city parochial all girls high school housed in a pre-civil war building in Washington, D.C. The majority of my students were Afro-American, the rest were Hispanic, and the debate over Black dialect versus standard English was raging. I had a free hand and, with the brashness of youth, I used it. Hawthorne and other "major literary figures" stayed, but they were forced to make room for a whole host of authors not used to entering the portals of parochial schools in the early seventies: Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes. The "Black is Beautiful" movement had arrived and with it anthologies like Black Voices and detailed filmstrips on the Harlem Renaissance.

Women had not yet arrived, at least not in the high school classroom and certainly not in the graduate studies I had just completed nor the undergraduate studies completed shortly before. And, oddly enough, although Sacred Heart Academy where I taught was

entirely female although not entirely Afro-American, it was the ethnicity of that particular student body, not the gender, that captured my attention.

It was only some twenty years later, during my first sabbatical at a relatively all white, four year state college that my attention turned to women's literature. During that spring semester of 1991, I chose to put myself through an intensive re-education program, excited and intrigued by the new Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, edited by Sandra Gilbert, then of Princeton, and Susan Gubar of Indiana University and printed in 1985. If Norton was the bible of literature, then women had just been sanctified. This time Afro-American literature lagged behind, only entering sacred ground recently with its own Norton anthology, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard.

My re-training continued into the summer of 1991 during which time I read the 2,390 onionskin pages of the new Norton Anthology cover to cover, consisting of 150 women writers and over 500 pieces of literature, some of which were novels, plays, and lengthy essays, and most of which I had never seen before. Then there were the numerous novels among the other fifty or so texts that made up my sabbatical reading list, also largely unheard of in my earlier education. That old, nagging question of why women had not written anything great became, for me at least, the question of why these texts had remained silent—unheard of and unread.

Two contemporary works by women writers that speak powerfully to this issue of voicelessness are Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Color Purple, and Jane Campion's acclaimed film, The Piano. Both works begin with an imposition of silence. Walker's novel opens with a transcription of the warning words Celie's stepfather spoke

to her concerning their illicit relationship, "You better not never tell nobody but God."[1] Similarly, Campion's film starts with a shot of Ada, the mute protagonist, and one of the two voice overs of her inner thoughts that occur in the movie: "The voice you hear is not my speaking voice but my mind's voice. I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me. My father says it is a dark talent, and the day I take it in my head to stop breathing will be my last."[2] Both women, although appearing very different with Celie being a rural Afro-American and Ada a Victorian lady who ends up in the New Zealand bush, are similar in that their tales are about a search for voice and, thus, identity. Both women achieve this through self-expression, Celie through writing her letters and Ada first through her piano and then literally through oral speech.

These two motifs, silence and salvation through artistic expression, often in the form of writing, are constants in women writers' texts. This isn't surprising since women, though a majority, share the traits of minority groups. One of the chief problems for subordinate classes—which besides women are often comprised of the culturally diverse—is to find an authentic voice in an often hostile, dominant culture which works to silence its least powerful members. Yet, this discovery of voice is what often allows people to speak autonomously, think independently, and, therefore, take authentic moral action—aims that are central to a liberal education. For these reasons, the inclusion of texts in the classroom that model the move from silence towards language, especially by marginalized characters, are important in promoting a liberal education that seeks to empower similarly silenced and marginalized students.

The reader first meets Celie, Walker's protagonist, as a young woman who is so profoundly isolated that that she makes up an audience for her letters, namely God.

Believed to be the victim of incest and warned by her supposed father to keep quiet, Celie already at the age of fourteen has been effectively silenced. Except for her sister, Nettie, the only person who has ever loved Celie, she exists as an object to be used or bartered rather than as a person. She is essentially parentless, both motherless and sold off in a loveless marriage to Mr. by a "father" who now finds her an inconvenience after bearing his two children. When Celie is eventually torn from her sister by her vengeful husband, her isolation is complete. Celie's conflict becomes whether to suffer in silence as an observer of life or to discover her own voice and her capacity for active choice as an autonomous human being. Walker's novel, then, is about Celie refusing to remain a commodity in a society that sees her as little else. It is about her entrance into selfhood, about loving and discovering that she is lovable and, thus, worthy of self-respect and the respect of others.

Celie can begin to move towards selfhood only after she meets Mr.'s old flame, the glamorous blues singer Shug Avery, who was based in part on the writer, Zora Neale Hurston.[3] Shug is uniquely herself—an authentic individual with her own thought out morality which is free of influences from the male dominated society in which she finds herself. Although her real name is Lillie, as Celie explains in one of her letters to God, "She just so sweet they call her Shug."[4] Her real name and its symbolism is telling. Shug is innocent in her sexuality because it comes out of a love of life and of herself and of God. The title of Walker's novel centers it around Shug's theology of both an imminent and omnipresent benign life force that wants everything to be loved and everything to flourish: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."[5] This is the antithesis of Celie's theology of God as an old white man which is

as much a hand me down as her shabby clothes: "Well, sometime Mr.—git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders, This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways."[6] Despite her emerging sexuality, occasioned by her lesbian relationship with Shug, it is this passive acceptance as well as her fear that keeps her from going off with Shug when the first opportunity presents itself and escaping her downtrodden existence with Mr.

It is only after Shug returns a second time and, by chance, discovers that Mr. has been hiding letters from Nettie addressed to Celie these many years that Celie can reach a turning point. It is her anger at Mr. and at a "big and old and tall and greybearded and white"[7] God whom she feels must be sleeping to have let this occur that enables Celie to accept Shug's definition of a genderless God to which Celie can relate: "Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it."[8] It is also Shug's nurturance, which Celie has otherwise lacked, that has allowed Celie to see herself differently—as someone worthy of love and respect and, therefore, entitled to fight to preserve her integrity as a human being. Her sister Nettie, who has become a missionary in Africa, also fosters Celie's emerging selfhood as she gains more self-respect from Nettie's experiences in Africa and a greater knowledge of her cultural heritage.

As a result of these experiences, Celie is able to overcome her habitual passivity that had been fostered by her image of a distant, white, male God who presides over a world of suffering, only alleviated by the hope of a distant heavenly future. Bolstered by a new definition of God which can include even her, and because of the discovery that she can love and be loved, Celie now has the moral courage to leave Mr. and escape to

Memphis with Shug when her second chance arrives. Earlier, shortly after she had discovered Mr.'s treachery, she had nearly killed him in her rage during her routine act of shaving him with a straight razor, brought to her senses only by Shug's intervention. When Mr. says she'll leave over his dead body, Celie may respond menacingly, but her act is the positive one of leaving her marriage for Memphis rather than the destructive act of murder which would have ultimately destroyed her as well: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need."[9] It is in a new place, in Memphis, that Celie finds herself and becomes part of creation by becoming a creator—in this case an artisan of pants. As the critic, Nancy Walker, points out, it is at this time that, unlike her earlier letters which went unsigned because she felt she was no one, Celie can sign a letter to Nettie with both a name and a place.[10]

In writing her letters, first to God and then to her sister Nettie, Walker goes on to remark that Celie changes from being passive and silenced to becoming "the novelist of her own life."[11] In doing this, she not only finds herself but her own voice and language—a dialect she refuses to give up. Near the end of the novel when Darlene, a friend, tries to teach Celie how to talk "properly," Celie writes Nettie: "Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down....Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind."[12] Having been almost banned in Oakland, California because a mother objected to the language of the novel, Alice Walker in her essay, "Coming in From the Cold," defended

her decision to let Celie tell her story in her own voice feeling that to speak in the language of her oppressor would have been to "deny her the validity of her existence."[13]

The novel ends, then, with Celie as creator, in a theology of creation, both in the medium of language and sewing. She has come to be both seen and heard versus remaining "invisible and silent"[14] in a culture that, like Mr. until his own transformation near the end of the novel, could only see Celie in terms of her physical and economic status: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all."[15] Through her sewing and letter writing, Celie has been able to give birth to her authentic self. As the critic, Elizabeth Fifer, makes clear, "In The Color Purple, Walker's narrative techniques realize and embody this primary truth; how we tell the stories of our lives determines the significance and outcome of the narratives that are our lives."[16]

Another work that underscores the importance of language and creative expression to self-attainment is Jane Campion's screenplay and film, The Piano. Like Celie, Ada McGrath is both invisible and silent. When the film opens with the interior dialogue that informs the audience of Ada's self-imposed muteness, her face is partially hidden between her splayed fingers. Although not as isolated as Celie at the beginning of The Color Purple because of her piano and her daughter, Ada, much like Celie, is rendered an object by the culture in which she finds herself. We find out early that her father has married her to a man she's never met, which is the reason for her journey by ship to the New Zealand bush. Although Stewart, the apparently sexually inexperienced Victorian husband to whom Ada has been sold, is no Mr., still she appears a victim as she is carried, crucifix

style, to shore by five seamen. The wide expanse of the ocean, beach, and bush only serve to heighten her isolation.

Unlike Celie, however, Ada is no passive victim but fiery in her anger, expressed through sign language and written notes, and strong willed. It is George Baines though, the white interpreter and foreman of the Maori natives who lives between two cultures, and not her husband who recognizes this strong feeling in Ada. He succumbs to Ada's obstinate and persistent request to take her back to the beach where her piano has been abandoned by her husband as too heavy an encumbrance to be transported through the dense bush. When he hears her play her piano as her daughter, Flora, dances wildly, he discovers Ada's passionate nature and is forcefully drawn to it. Like Baines who is neither native nor traditional white man, so Ada, too, stands outside the culture of both the Maori and the decorous and repressed Christian women who surround her.

Just as Ada was sold by her father to Stewart, so Stewart sells Ada's piano, against her wishes, to Baines in exchange for land. Under the ruse of wanting lessons, Baines uses the piano to get close to Ada and to the source of her passionate nature which has so fascinated him. Bribing Ada, Baines makes another swap: the piano will be bartered away one black key at each lesson in return for Ada permitting him certain freedoms while she plays.

Unlike Celie, it isn't outrage born of a newly expressive self that finally allows Ada to find her voice, but love. What started with Ada once again being victimized by a deal in which Baines clearly had the upper hand, ends with him a victim of his intense desire for Ada whom he has come to know through her playing: "I am giving the piano back to you. I've had enough. The arrangement is making you a whore and me wretched. I want you

to care for me, but you can't."[17] Ada is as shocked as Baines when she discovers that she doesn't want to be let go, looking down on Baines' hut as she once longingly looked down on her piano, abandoned on the beach. It is during their eventual lovemaking that we first seem to hear Ada, although there are only the mere whispers of sounds rather than speech. And it is shortly afterwards that she can kiss herself in the mirror and love herself rather than being consumed by anger and bitterness.

When Stewart discovers Ada and Baines in the act, he spies on them rather than stopping them which, besides the natives referring to him as "dry balls," seems to point to his virginal ignorance. When he is rejected by Ada after a clumsy attempt that borders on rape, he locks her up. Hearing that Baines is to leave the island, she spoils the piano by pulling out a wooden key on which she carves, "Dear George you have my heart Ada Mcgrath."[18] Her daughter, jealous of losing the sole attention of her mother, takes the key not to Baines but to Stewart. Angered not only by Ada's sexual rejection but by what he takes to be her betrayal, Stewart furiously and irrationally first strikes her piano with his ax and then violently chops off her finger, later saying to her, "I clipped your wing, that's all."[19]

When he is unable to kill Baines, shaken by this dark and passionate side of himself that he didn't know existed, Stewart tells him that he heard Ada speak, not orally but inside his mind, saying: "I am afraid of my will, of what it might do it is so strange and so strong. I have to go. Let me go. Let Baines take me away. Let him try to save me."[20] Knowing that it is useless to try to keep Ada and wanting to regain his former self-control, Stewart wishes the lovers gone.

Aboard ship with the piano crated and resembling a coffin, the natives urge Baines to throw it overboard before it can capsize their small vessel. Refusing to do so, it is Ada who insists the piano is spoiled and must be pushed overboard. Like Celie before her, about to slit Mr.'s throat while shaving him, Ada deliberately places her foot in the coiled rope and is dragged into the ocean with the piano. Eerily tied to the piano like some dark and destructive will, only seconds elapse before she struggles to loosen her foot from her bound shoe in order to free herself. As she breaks the surface in a scene laden with imagery of resurrection and rebirth, Ada thinks: "What a death! What a chance! What a surprise! My will has chosen life!?"[21] Like Celie entering creation, Ada has discovered her moral capacity for active and authentic choice and is able to be baptized into a new life.

At the close of the film, drenched in sunlight versus the dark grays and greens of the sea and bush, the audience once again hears a voice over of Ada's inner thoughts. Informing the audience that she now offers piano lessons, enabled to do so by the new piano Baines has bought and the artificial finger he has fashioned for her, she also reveals that she is learning to talk. Embarrassed by the odd sounds she makes, she drapes her head with a dark veil while she practices talking, that is until Baines unveils her as he walks by in order to kiss her. Thus, like Celie, at the end of the film Ada is no longer silent and invisible but a human being who has attained self-realization not only through the creative expression of her piano playing but through the discovery of her voice.

Just as twenty-five years ago I followed a gut instinct as a novice teacher to incorporate works by Afro-American authors in the classroom, so today I am convinced that there is an ethical dimension involved in choosing texts which doesn't have to do with

censorship and control but rather with the liberation of thought. Texts such as those discussed not only encourage the move from silence towards language, especially for those marginalized students who might need the encouragement most, but also offer alternate values and moralities from those of a dominant culture which may suppress certain segments of society. Teaching such texts, far from diminishing the literary canon, illustrate in all their complexity how the acquisition of voice and language is central to speaking autonomously, thinking independently, and becoming capable of genuine moral action which can only issue from an authentic individual. Celie and Ada are two such people.

Notes

[1] Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Pocket, 1982), 1.

[2] The Piano, prod. Jan Chapman, writ. and dir. Jane Campion, 121 min., Miramax, 1994, videocassette.

[3] Donna Haisty Winchell, Alice Walker (New York: Twayne, 1992), 90.

[4] A. Walker, 126.

[5] Ibid., 203.

[6] Ibid., 44.

[7] Ibid., 201.

[8] Ibid., 202.

[9] Ibid., 207.

[10] Nancy Walker, Feminist Alternatives (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 62.

[11] Ibid., 63.

[12] A. Walker, 222-23.

[13] Winchell, 87.

[14] Elizabeth Fifer, "The Dialect and Letters of The Color Purple," in Contemporary American Women, eds. Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 159.

[15] A. Walker, 213.

[16] Fifer, 165.

[17] Jane Campion, The Piano (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 76.

[18] The Piano.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

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